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Polymorphic Students: New Descriptions and Conceptions of Community College Students From the Perspectives of Administrators and Faculty

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Abstract

Objective: In an effort to break away from the stale classifications of community college students that stem from the hegemonic perspective of previous literature, this work utilizes the perceptions of community college practitioners to demonstrate new ways of understanding the identities of community college students. **Method:** By utilizing Gee's identity theory and Grillo's theory of intersectionality, we analyze interviews with community college practitioners from three different community colleges on the West coast of the United States to answer these questions: What identities (i.e., natural, institutional, and discursive) do faculty and administrators recognize in community college students? In what ways do community college faculty and administrators describe and conceptualize community college students? **Findings:** First, community college student identities are intricate and have changed with time; there are two different institutional views held by organizational members—the *educational view* and the *managerial view*—which both shape the construction of student identities and play a prominent role in determining which students are disadvantaged. Second, organizational members constructed meanings of student achievement and value (i.e., attributes or outcomes of the ideal student, or what policy makers and institutions refer to as *success*) according to organizational priorities and perspectives. **Conclusion:** This investigation encapsulates and elucidates the

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portrayals and understandings of community college students held by community college administrators and faculty as a means to acknowledge the diverse identities among these students. Scholars and practitioners are encouraged to acknowledge the polymorphic identities of this diverse population to improve scholarship and practice.

Keywords

student identity, community college students, intersectionality, perspectives of administrators and faculty

What *kind of person* (Gee, 2000) is a community college student? Historically, community college scholarship and policy have conceptualized and ascribed various labels to students based on students' characteristics. In some instances, these labels have changed as community college students' characteristics changed (e.g., Shaw, 1999). Yet, traditional scholarly and policy conceptions of the community college students have reflected the values and ideologies of policy makers and individual scholars, and fail to account for the complexity of student identities.

Since the 1970s—with the crystallization of the community college as an open-access and multipurpose institution—traditional students, primarily middle class and White, lost their prominence as the core of the student body, and students of color entered the community college (London, 1978; Richardson, Fisk, & Okun, 1983; Weis, 1985). What followed in scholarship were concerns about changes to institutional culture and student achievement (McGrath & Spear, 1991; Roueche & Roueche, 1993). A discourse on diversity evolved in the 1990s (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996), with focus on multiculturalism to highlight differences among students, largely on the basis of race and ethnicity. At the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s, the term *traditional* was juxtaposed to another term, *non-traditional* (Herideen, 1998; Levin, 2014; Shaw, 1999), and this broadened the understanding of community college students. But the 1990s was also the period when policy makers began to characterize students as economic entities (Grubb, 1996; Levin, 2005; Roueche, Taber, & Roueche, 1995).

In the 2000s, the twin themes of equity and achievement entered the literature (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Dowd, 2003), and together harken back in contrast to an earlier period when access to educational opportunities was the preeminent function of the institution. Both terms presaged a future when students as socially legitimized learners and completers would be prized by scholars, policy makers, and practitioners (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2001; Price, 2004; Pusser & Levin, 2009; Shaw & Rab, 2003). At the end of the first decade and into the second decade of the 2000s, policy makers identified students by their outcomes. With the label *success* synonymous with learning (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Shulock & Moore, 2007), scholarship (Moore & Shulock, 2007; Prince & Jenkins, 2005) focused on what made particular groups of students successful as completers, with little regard to the possibility of multiple definitions of success (Levin, 2014). Scholarly conceptions of community college students which centered on their success reflected the

values and ideologies of policy makers and individual scholars, narrowed student identities to instruments of economic value, social aspirations, or academic attainment, and likely hampered the implementation of policies that did not address specific deficit issues, such as remediation or completion.

Historical characterizations and categorizations of community college students have been largely the work of policy makers, researchers, and community college *boosters* (Frye, 1994) and have not necessarily reflected the conceptions and identities bestowed to students by day-to-day practitioners who interacted with, taught, served, and managed students. Becker (1986) describes this phenomenon of characterization and categorization as *ideological hegemony*, and suggests that consistent patterns in scholarly literature could impede new ways of understanding phenomena. As a result, historical policy and recommendations for practice were determined by conceptions of who the community college student was (their identities) that were derived from dominant discourses, tied to social, cultural, political, and economic interests, and bound by conditions of historical periods, including sociodemographic changes. These socially constructed conceptions reflected “unity, identity, permanence, structure and essences” that were “privileged over dissonance, disparity, plurality, transience and change” (Chia, 1995, p. 581). Thus, both community college scholarly literature and practice were poorly served by students characterized as one-dimensional homogeneous groups and subsequently bestowed erroneous identities.

Perceptions of identity formed by those who interact with community college students regularly are likely to mediate the effects of the hegemonic assumptions of identity created by scholarship and policy for two reasons. First, the masking effects of one’s exposure to consistent portrayals of an identity (in this case, community college student identity) can be mediated by an individual’s regular interaction with the target group (Bandura, 2001); the more practitioners interact with students, the more likely they are able to form their own perceptions of students, independent of outside sources. Second, identities are social constructions (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Gee (2000) suggests that an individual’s identity is constructed with both self-conceptions and conceptions of identity that are bestowed upon an individual by others. That is, the way in which practitioners identify, or characterize, students influences the identity of the students themselves. Practitioners, over time, not only see student identity clearly but they also contribute to the very creation of student identity. Therefore, members of the community college are able to identify and construct community college student identity with greater accuracy than scholars and policy makers who, unlike administrators and faculty, are often distanced from this population (Shaw, Rhoads, & Valadez, 1999).

The purpose of this investigation was to capture and explain descriptions and conceptions of community college students held by community college administrators and faculty. While we acknowledge that faculty and administrators are influenced by their own forms of hegemonic assumption—for example, Levin (2014) finds that community college institutional members may view students from a deficit lens—we suggest that by comparing contemporary scholarly understandings of community college student identity with the identities bestowed by institutional members, our investigation enables us to provide a more complete view of the multiple identities of

community college students. Furthermore, we assert that faculty and administrators provide moderately better descriptions of community college students because of their prolonged interaction with this student population (Bandura, 2001). Thus, through this investigation, we aim to provide understandings of community college students that, collectively, reflect pluralistic and polymorphic identities of this population and are not wedded to dominant discourses on those students as a singular or narrowly defined population, such as *underprepared*, *first generation*, *minority*, or *commodities*.

Community College Students in the Higher Education Literature

A traditional approach found in institutional discourse and in scholarship is the classification of community college students into curricular groups such as remedial education, technical education, and transfer education (Pusser & Levin, 2009). These curricular groups become identities ascribed by the institution to students (Pusser & Levin, 2009). Additional institutional identities may be part-time or full-time student, degree seeking or non-degree seeking, resident or non-resident, and traditional or non-traditional (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013). There are specific challenges associated with each identity because of the specific characteristics of students. For example, part-time students often struggle with full-time jobs (Cohen et al., 2013), and the completion rates for remedial education students are significantly lower than those for their counterparts (Pusser & Levin, 2009). The boundaries that divide these identities are not immutable: A student may change from a part-time to a full-time status by enrolling in more units (Cohen et al., 2013). The permeable boundaries of these institutional identities make it difficult to classify which students fit into which category over time. Moreover, students may fit into multiple types of institutional identities simultaneously (e.g., part-time, vocational, non-resident, university transfer).

Scholarly literature has also utilized demographic characteristics (e.g., race, gender, and age) to typify community college students; this approach does not account for the complexities within these demographic categories or the ways in which these identities interact with each other (Levin, 2014). Scholars have documented specific struggles that students face due to their gender or race and ethnicity (e.g., Cammarota, 2004; Maldonado & Farmer, 2006), but Shaw et al. (1999) suggest that there are “different kinds of difference” (p. 167) that lead to a more complete understanding of individuals. For example, parenthood may be a neglected identity when scholars attempt to categorize community college students (Levin, 2014). Students with the added responsibility of parenthood—at community colleges, one eighth of students are single parents (Cohen et al., 2013)—may have difficulty attending class in the absence of child care (Shaw et al., 1999). Other such identities include sexuality and physical disability (Vaccaro, 2015). Students in non-mainstream sexuality groups and students with a physical disability may experience discrimination which hampers their ability to engage in college activities. Community college students can be a combination of identities, which makes the definition of a single and static identity of a *typical*

community college student imprecise (Levin, 2014). Scholars attempt to account for more than one identity through the creation of broad categories of traditional and non-traditional students (Herideen, 1998; Levin, 2014; Shaw, 1999). Rather than highlighting the complexity of community college student identity, these large and monolithic categories mask and deny students' network (or intersection) of identities.

Scholarship has, for decades, described community college students as a foil to university students (Cohen et al., 2013). That is, institutions can be differentiated, with universities considered senior institutions, more prestigious, and allegedly possessing higher standards than community colleges. There is a stratifying purpose for differentiating student identities. Scholars and policy makers ascribe identities to community college students, which are not necessarily supported with empirical evidence. Shaw (1999) finds that community college administrators and faculty members who interacted with students were able to understand the complexity of students' lives and ascribe identities to students in ways that traditional scholarship neglected. Seventeen years later, we take a similar position to reconceptualize contemporary community college students.

Theoretical Foundation

We assert that a singular, essentialist conception of student identity is insufficient to explain the tapestry of kinds of students at community colleges. This claim aligns with Grillo's (1995) theory of intersectionality, which suggests that the intersection of different conceptualized classes or groups (e.g., race, gender, and sexual orientation) leads to advantage or disadvantage for certain combinations of identities. To explain the intersectionality (Grillo, 1995) and complexity of community college students' identities (Shaw, 1999), we apply Gee's (2000) identity theory and identity categories (i.e., nature, institution, discursive, and affinity identities). Although the categories of natural, institutional, discursive, and affinity identities are intertwined—"these four perspective are *not* separate from each other" (Gee, 2000, p. 101, emphasis in original)—each separate perspective can be used to illuminate the multifaceted identities of community college students. The discrete categories are heuristic, and "focus our attention on how identities are formed and sustained" (p. 101). The nature perspective is recognized as *natural* or *biological*, although, because it is ascribed, it is a construct. For example, the nature identity of African Americans is a social construction and does not exist empirically in nature. To classify students by race or ethnicity, gender, or age is to recognize them as in possession of a specific kind of nature identity. The *institutional* perspective is an official or authorized ascription carried out by institutional actors, naming a role (e.g., full-time, online), designation (e.g., developmental, Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics [STEM]), or formal condition (e.g., international, undocumented immigrants). The *discursive* perspective is a property or trait of an individual or group that is sustained by the ways in which one group of people talk about the individuality of another, such as personality (e.g., intense, naïve), behaviors (e.g., altruistic, lazy), and even physical appearance (e.g., glamorous, unkempt). Finally, the *affinity* perspective entails distinctive practices connected to a

group and a group's behaviors: "allegiance *primarily* to a set of common endeavors or practices and *secondarily* to other people in terms of shared culture or traits" (Gee, 2000, p. 105, emphasis in original).

The construction of natural, institutional, discursive, and affinity identities involves different degrees of interaction between individuals. Natural and institutional identities involve references to general classifications, assigned by those in power, as an effort to categorize an individual's identity. Conversely, discursive and affinity identities involve co-constructed typifications based on relatively prolonged social interactions between the others and the subject (Gee, 2000). While natural, institutional, and discursive identities are ascribed by others to a subject, affinity identities are dependent on the self-perceptions of the subject (Gee, 2000). Given that our data emanate from those in power and not the students themselves, we exclude the analysis of affinity identities as a part of our investigation.

Recent research has employed Gee's (2000) identity theory to study other aspects of education. Cobb and Hodge (2011) discuss the dynamic identities of high school mathematics students. Johnson, Brown, Carlone, and Cuevas (2011) employ identity theory to describe barriers to self-authorship for faculty of color, and Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) utilize identity theory to explain the ways in which individuals with similar characteristics develop significantly different core identities. This theory has not yet been employed for the study of community college students.

Research Questions

Based on the literature review, our research purpose, and the theoretical perspectives of this investigation, the following constitute our research questions:

Research Question 1: What identities (i.e., natural, institutional, and discursive) do faculty and administrators recognize in community college students?

Research Question 2: In what ways do community college faculty and administrators describe and conceptualize community college students?

Methodology and Method

The principal methodology employed for this investigation is field methods research (Burgess, 1984; Erickson, 1986; Mason, 2002; Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2012), with reliance upon qualitative data collection methods and qualitative data analysis (Richards, 2009). This investigation is derived from the principal researcher's engagement with actual sites and from firsthand interactions with social actors (Yin, 2009). The selected methodology enabled us to focus on the meaning perspectives of particular actors (i.e., administrators and faculty) in specific settings (i.e., community colleges) and to identify similarities in the "local meanings" (Erickson, 1986, p. 19) attached to students' identities by organizational members of three community colleges in the United States.

The Investigation

This investigation was derived from a larger project that sought to analyze the structural changes during the period of 2000 to 2014 in seven community colleges in the United States and Canada (Levin, in press). For that project, the principal researcher gathered qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews ($n = 65$), field notes (i.e., field journal entries), and federal, state, and provincial higher education documents, as well as organizational formal documents from four higher education organizations in Canada and three in the United States.

We used a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2005) to narrow the data from the original project to those from the United States and to those that provided faculty and administrators' views of their *life world* (Kvale, 1983). In this investigation, we focused on community colleges in the United States, which excluded the Canadian institutions because three of the four institutions became teaching universities and only one remained a community college. The sites for this investigation consisted of three community colleges in the Pacific region of the United States—in the states of California, Washington, and Hawai'i. The three colleges were located in or adjacent to large population cities with a high level of immigrant populations. The colleges differed in size from one another: One college has a population of more than 30,000 students; a second, 24,000; and, the third, just more than 6,000. All three colleges had programmatic similarities but different emphases: One college had a vocational technical orientation but with baccalaureate programs; one college put an emphasis on transfer; and the third college had a more comprehensive focus absent blue-collar, vocational programs. We considered the research sites as typical community colleges in the United States, specifically community colleges in the Western United States (consistent with Cohen et al.'s, 2013, description): They had comprehensive curricula that included transfer, general education, technical education, English as a Second Language (ESL), and continuing education, and the student body was diverse in their race/ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status. To maintain each college's anonymity, we used the following pseudonyms: Suburban Valley Community College (SVCC) for California, City South Community College (CSCC) for Washington, and Pacific Suburban Community College (PSCC) for Hawai'i, as set out in our university's Human Subjects Review policies. Furthermore, to protect the identity of the participants of this investigation, we used labels for each participant. We referred to participants by their position and role in their organization (e.g., President, Department chair, Humanities faculty). This action also enabled us to consider the role of institutional members' positionality in their understandings of students' identities for data analysis and findings.

The data set for this investigation included 31 individual interviews, including interviews with two administrators twice over a 1-year period, two interviews with two people, of which one of two were interviewed again individually. The sample included participants with different organizational positions. The interviewees included 14 women and 15 men as well as members from different disciplinary backgrounds and varying levels of seniority, from recent hires to established faculty and

administrators of 15 or more years at their institution. Fourteen participants held an administrative position (e.g., chancellor, president, dean), and the faculty included several who served as department chairs or program coordinators. Faculty in disciplinary and program areas of social sciences, business, humanities, developmental education, mathematics, and science were interviewed, which enabled us to analyze similarities in faculty across disciplines. The interviews followed a semi-structured format (Seidman, 2012) and were approximately 60 to 90 minutes long. The interview questions aimed to ensure that the participants discussed their experiences and understandings in relation to the colleges' goals, changes in the colleges during 2000-2014 period, students' characteristics, and the colleges' strategies to serve students.

Analytical Framework and Methods

For data analysis, we established a team of five researchers. Collectively, we operationalized theory, performed content analysis of data (Lichtman, 2013), reviewed codes for consistency (Richards, 2009), and established strategies to protect the identity of the participants in the investigation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). We employed constructs of Gee's (2000) identity theory as an analytical framework to explain the specific ways faculty and administrators described, explained, and categorized students' identities.

Three of the four identity types proposed by Gee (2000) guided data analysis in this investigation (i.e., natural, institutional, and discursive identities). We analyzed data in our search for descriptions of students' natural characteristics such as biological sex, gender, nationality, or age (i.e., natural identities). To identify students' institutional identities, we sought descriptions of the formal identities bestowed by the college and indications of the position as well as the roles, rights, and responsibilities of the student in that position. Finally, we reviewed data to locate references to non-official individual characteristics of the students (e.g., motivated, disengaged, or knowledgeable), that is, discursive identities.

Once we operationalized theory, we performed content analysis of data (Lichtman, 2013). As an initial step of analysis, the research team reviewed the interviews repeatedly to become immersed in the data to form a general understanding of the content and context of each participant's communication (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). A second step of analysis entailed open coding (Gibbs, 2007). In this phase, we located and labeled interviewees' expressions about students as well as students' characteristics and determined a list of descriptive codes (Richards, 2009) using the participants' own language (Erickson, 1986)—for example, local, remedial, or motivated student. We noted 107 different ways in which faculty and administrators referred to students at their colleges.

Subsequently, we performed secondary analysis for interpretation of the latent meanings of the data (Richards, 2009). We reviewed the descriptive codes and organized them thematically to cluster data into the three theoretical categories: (a) natural identities, (b) institutional identities, and (c) discursive identities (see Table 1). In this step of analysis, the research team reviewed the reduced and clustered data (Miles

Table 1. Student Identities Mentioned by Faculty and Administrators at Each College, Classified by College and Gee's (2000) Identity Categories.

Identity category	Suburban Valley Community College (California)	City South Community College (Washington)	Pacific Suburban Community College (Hawaii)
Natural identities	Younger students	Middle-aged	
	Teenagers	Young people, whippersnapper generation	
	Younger generation	Older guys	
	Adults/old		
	Asian	Women	
	Mexican American	Asian	Asian
	Latino	Non-Asian, American	Native Hawaiian
	African American/Black	Hispanic/Latino students	Samoans
	Filipino	African American	Native Indians
	Chinese American	White	Alaskan natives
	Vietnamese American		
	Korean American		
	Indo-American		
	Iranian American		
	White		
	From the Eastside	International students/foreign students	Local students
	Local students	(North African students, South East Asian, Japanese, Chinese, Indonesia, Thailand, Middle-Eastern students, Saudi Arabia)	U.S. mainland students
	International students (from China, Indonesia, Korea)	Refugees (Iranian, Russians, Ukrainians)	International students (African, Moroccan, Middle East students, Malaysian, Korean, Chinese, Japanese)
		Immigrant students (Vietnamese)	
		Non-native English speakers	Immigrants
	New immigrants		
	Undocumented students		
	Bilingual	Working adults	
	Middle class (30%)	Fairly poor	Full-time workers
	Low-SES (50%)	Poor/low income	
	Poor		

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Identity category	Suburban Valley Community College (California)	City South Community College (Washington)	Pacific Suburban Community College (Hawaii)
Institutional identities	Able-bodied		
	Disabled		
	Visually impaired		
	Connected identities:	Connected identities:	
	Asian girl	Poor South East Asian immigrant	
	Young Hispanic men	Hispanic DREAM Act students	
	Asians who were born and raised here	International students in aviation program	
	Iranian, immigrant kid	International students non-native English speakers	
		Risk-averse Latino students	
		White women, middle-aged working	
	Part-time students	Part-time students	Part-time students
	Full-time students	Full-time students	Full-time students
	Full-time equivalencies	Full-time equivalencies	Full-time equivalencies
	International students	International students	International students
	Undocumented students	Non-native English speakers	Native Hawaiian
	Underrepresented students	A piece of a diversity portfolio	Underrepresented students
	Disabled		Immigrants
	Visually impaired		
	Vulnerable students		
	Student with ADHD		
	Transfer student	Transfer/pre-requisite students	Pre-science student
	One course	Degree seeking	Engineering-type degree
	Need basic skills	Online learners	Working students
	English learner	Culinary arts	Remedial education
	Tennis players	Technical business	Developmental completers
	Online student	Pre-nursing students	Summer bridge program
	Independence track	aviation program	English as Second Language
		Freshman engineering	Liberal arts
		aerospace engineer	Hawaiian studies major

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Identity category	Suburban Valley Community College (California)	City South Community College (Washington)	Pacific Suburban Community College (Hawaii)
	<p>Hybrid classes</p> <p>Morning cohort</p> <p>Afternoon cohort</p> <p>Baccalaureate graduates</p> <p>Needing developmental education</p> <p>Connected identities:</p> <p>Enrolled in face-to-face classes and taking online classes</p> <p>People from the UW, who take their foreign languages at CCCC</p> <p>Working adults</p> <p>Independent learners</p> <p>Foreign students work like dogs</p> <p>Good Asian student</p> <p>Vietnamese students—Always serious students</p> <p>Very bright, very skillful students</p> <p>North African students don't value education</p> <p>Non-native English speakers are plagiarists</p> <p>Underprepared</p> <p>Risk-averse Latino and Asian students</p> <p>White students are okay with debt</p>	<p>Degree seeking</p> <p>Non-degree seeking</p> <p>Certificate students</p> <p>Across campuses enrollee</p> <p>Pell recipients</p> <p>Connected identities:</p> <p>Degree-seeking part-time student</p> <p>Full-time international students</p> <p>Underrepresented native students</p> <p>They tried so hard</p> <p>Workers</p> <p>Students don't come to college ready</p> <p>International students have poor English language skills</p> <p>Chinese students are from a middle class</p>	
Discursive identities	<p>Connected identities: Students take a mix of on-campus and online courses</p> <p>High-performing kids</p> <p>Motivated</p> <p>Incredibly intelligent</p> <p>Engaged</p> <p>Happy to be here</p> <p>Commuter</p> <p>Explorer (of majors)</p> <p>Confused (with the system)</p> <p>Locally oriented</p> <p>Attached to a cloud</p> <p>Alienated</p>		

Note. The identities are annotated using the participants' own words. SES = socioeconomic status; DREAM = Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors ; ADHD = Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; UW = University of Washington; CCCC = City South Community College.

et al., 2014) to check for data and code consistency (Richards, 2009)—that is, to determine whether specific segments of data were coded using the appropriate category while they reflected the participants' views. During this last step, the theoretical categories enabled us to explain students' identities from the perspectives of faculty and administrators.

Trustworthiness

Our analytical methods not only conformed to reliable scholarship on qualitative data analysis (Miles et al., 2014) but also ensured trustworthiness of findings (Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007). The use of multiple researchers, including the principal investigator, three doctoral students, and one university administrator with a recently completed doctoral degree, enabled various perspectives on and understandings of the data set. The principal investigator, who conducted all the interviews, oversaw the analysis and responded to each of the researchers' understandings in an effort to modify, challenge, or confirm them.

Findings

Participants at the three colleges used age, race and ethnicity, gender, place of origin, socioeconomic status, immigration status, academic background, and enrollment status as categories for describing students' identities. We found, as Gee (2000) suggests, that some of the labels used as natural identities were also used to refer to institutional identities, but the names used for discursive identities were different from those used for both natural and institutional identities (see Table 1). Although faculty and administrators at the three colleges referred to similar student identities, the centrality of these identities at each campus varied according to state policy, which pushed for the increasing inclusion of specific populations, the states' sociodemographic characteristics, the positionality of the interviewees, and the college primary mission—"transfer," "vocational or professional," or "liberal arts." Thus, at SVCC, natural identities that reflect race or ethnic diversity were central for members of the college; at CSCC, identities related to socioeconomic background of students guided the conversation; and at PSCC the status as an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (ANAPISI) centered the conversation on native Hawaiian students.

Despite the differences between institutions, our findings suggest that across all three institutions organizational members both impose organizational values, such as access for specific populations, upon student identities and apply judgments to students through student identities, such as *disadvantaged* or *underrepresented*. We found that, first, community college student identities are complex and have changed over time. Second, organizational members constructed meanings of student achievement and value (i.e., attributes or outcomes of the ideal student, or what policy makers and institutions refer to as success) according to organizational priorities and perspectives. Third, two different institutional views held by organizational members—the

educational view and the *managerial view*—not only shaped the construction of student identities but also played a prominent role in judgments of students and in whether students were advantaged or disadvantaged by the institution. These findings were common across the three colleges.

Conceptualizing Students: Longitudinal Identity

Faculty and administrators provided descriptions of students' identities as dynamic rather than as static entities. Participants described student identities that (a) changed over time and (b) were complex, multiple, and simultaneous. This is consistent with intersectionality theory (Howard & Renfrow, 2014). Interviewees indicated that community college students' identities altered over time due to sociodemographic changes in the population at each location (e.g., the characteristics of the students enrolled in 2013 were different from those enrolled three decades earlier), and that the educational programs and offerings at these three colleges enabled enrolled students to move from one institutional identity to another. Furthermore, students' identities did not stand independently or isolated from other identities (Howard & Renfrow, 2014; Levin, 2014; Shaw, 1999). Faculty and administrators described complex associations of institutional identities with natural identities, or two or more simultaneous institutional identities that led to a variety of institutional advantages for students.

Students' identities changed over time. The natural identities of students at these colleges had changed in part because "demographics in the country have changed" (Humanities faculty, CCCC) and because the colleges targeted particular populations. Students' identities associated with age, family structure, and other obligations altered over time: "The 1957 standard [has changed] . . . [T]oday's students are living on their own, working full-time, paying \$31/unit plus all the other fees" (Program coordinator, SVCC). In addition, each college used strategies to increase the diversity of the student population: "We became a part of Achieving the Dream back in 2006; [we] made native Hawaiians our targeted population" (Vice President, PSCC). With these targeting strategies, identities associated with race and ethnicity became more numerous at the three colleges. A Humanities faculty at CCCC noted this diversity: "We do have a remarkably diverse student population and a real sense of mission around that." The increased diversity of students' natural identities compelled the colleges to address diverse needs: "It's always going to be different types of students that you will be dealing with, and you have problems that you never anticipated before" (Faculty Senate leader, PSCC).

Although most of the demographic alterations entailed change to natural identities of students, particularly those associated with race, ethnicity, nationality, age, and family structure, organizational identities also changed. Organizational members noted that students' identities altered during the period in which a particular student was affiliated with the college. Alterations to students' enrollment type (e.g., full-time or part-time), course modality (e.g., online or face to face), or academic goals (e.g., course, transfer, credential, or certification) influenced changes to students' institutional identities, for example, from one classification of student to another.

Well if they're taking [another campus's] class, they pay the [other campus's] tuition, but the rest of their classes they will pay [our] tuition. And when they do decide to make the shift, it's a declaration from the student . . . So all they have to do is say, "Okay, I'm ready," and they're treated like a continuing student [at the university]. (Vice President, PSCC)

Other alterations to students' institutional identities corresponded both to students' educational goals and to each college's survival strategies. For example, CSCC altered students' identities from "international FTEs [full-time equivalency students]" to "state FTEs" to counteract cuts in state funding (Administrator, CSCC). Yet, these alterations in formal institutional identities accounted only for part of the complexity of the community college student population.

Organizational members saw community college students' identities as complex, multiple, and simultaneous. Faculty and administrators referred to students primarily by associating natural identities with institutional identities. These identity references took two forms. First, institutional members in some cases noted that a natural identity was also an institutional identity.

[We made] native Hawaiians a focus of the outcomes measure. . . . There are five measures that have dollars attached to them: graduates, number of graduates, number of STEM graduates, number of native Hawaiian graduates, number of Pell recipients, because we were heavily underutilizing Pell and then transfers within system. (Vice President, PSCC)

Here, a natural identity (e.g., native Hawaiian) was connected to an institutional identity, with the natural identity used in the context of student performance, such as formal policy on student assessment and learning outcomes, or for the purposes of federal grant proposals. Besides this association, organizational members associated multiple natural and institutional identities.

In the second form of identity reference, organizational members connected institutional identities (e.g., enrollment type) with seemingly unrelated natural identities (e.g., race, age), or they described the connection among two or more institutional identities (e.g., class modality and academic goals).

[Taking online classes] it was mainly White women, not [just] White but middle-aged working people were taking [them]. . . . It was [because] they were going to two classes [face-to-face classes]. They just couldn't take three so they took one and the majority were students who were attending and were taking one class they couldn't get, or they couldn't get here. (Chancellor, CSCC)

In another example, a business faculty member echoed this sentiment:

Geographically, our students take a mix of on campus and online courses. So it's hard to call [them] an online student or traditional student because they happen to be both. (Business faculty, SVCC)

Organizational members acknowledged that students at the three colleges had complex identities that implied complex educational needs. Consistent with Gee's (2000)

conceptualization of institutional identities, faculty and administrators bestowed multiple identities (e.g., online students, women, White, middle-aged) to students, which provided institutional meanings to non-institutional (natural and discursive) identities. That is, although in some instances organizational members used a singular identity to refer to a group of students, faculty and administrators used the connection among several identities (e.g., traditional student and online student) to determine the ways in which the colleges could improve their educational services.

Who Is Successful and Who Is Valued?

Conceptions of students' accomplishment of institutionally preferred college outcomes determined whether or not students were labeled *successful*. Conceptions of student worth to the organization shaped institutional identities of students. Institutional identities of students—successful or not successful and valued or not valued—were attached to assumptions of student ability in the form of assets and deficits; accreditation criteria; national and state policy; and funding behaviors. For students at PSCC, it was necessary to remove deficits in academic background, so that native Hawaiian students, who were associated with such deficits, could move on to program completion, or transfer, and thus be labeled *successful*:

We're trying to get every student we can to be successful and . . . we have measureable outcomes. . . . What we're trying to do is increase the percentage of students who complete first year college Math and English in their first year. . . . They may have started in developmental but we want them to get through, complete college level Math and English in their first year. That's the measure. . . . Well that's the Darwinian dilemma right there [with the students at a lower level]. We are kind of selecting in, selecting out. . . . We're going to try to have more of them get degrees and transfer. That's what we're going to do for native Hawaiians. Same thing we do for all students. The inputs on that might be different, but the outcomes are all the same. So that's how I think we got away with it for accreditation. . . . If they finish college Math and English in the first year, they make the same amount of academic progress as all the other students. (Administrator, PSCC)

When institutional members defined students primarily by institutional identities, students were valued in relation to the ways in which their characteristics helped or hindered the advancement of organizational goals. Students who were classified as local, diverse, full-time, or STEM majors, or a combination of these classifications, were assets to the colleges because they helped advance resource acquisition and curricular agendas. A Humanities faculty at PSCC underlined the importance of Native Hawaiian students to the college's STEM initiatives: "I think that that focus on Hawaiian student success, it was a big part of the STEM emphasis. Their grants were emphasizing that. They really made that push." For CSCC, STEM students qualified the college for National Science Foundation (NSF) funding: "It's also is part of this NSF grant . . . [that is] Math, Science. [We are] trying to get more students to transfer to the [University] in the STEM fields" (Science faculty, CSCC). STEM students not only qualified the institution for external grant funding but also boosted their university transfer profile.

Conversely, students who worked full-time or struggled with Mathematics were viewed as deficits; they were identified by faculty and administrators as unsuccessful because of their behaviors' misalignment with organizational goals. College members suggested that students who worked full-time had little chance to meet institutional expectations: "They're just not . . . going to cut it" (Science faculty, CCCC). "They don't really see the fact that there's just no way they can be successful if they're working full-time" (Science faculty, PCCC). Therefore, the institutional identity of students as part-timers was connected to a devalued institutional identity. To change students' identity from unsuccessful students to successful, to align student behaviors with colleges' goals and values, organizational members endeavored to alter students' course-taking practices: "What they're trying to do is to get people to enroll full-time because full-time students are more successful and it all stems from being more efficient with your money" (Dean, SVCC). The "full-time student" institutional identity was valued because of its positive reinforcement of institutional goals.

Notwithstanding the organizational pressures to conform to definitions of success and value that gave benefit to the organization, there were organizational members who recognized that these institutional definitions of success and ascriptions of value were not necessarily aligned with students' best interests. A department chair at SVCC criticized the organization's view as well as the accrediting agency's requirement that students be viewed as measurable outcomes:

It doesn't matter [to accrediting agency] if my students are learning more or less, it only matters that I entered some kind of something or other in the database and they can check off: "Oh, she's done her outcomes." . . . What the accreditation team wants is not to know that students are learning; they want to know that we have documented that we have thought about whether students are learning or talked about it. (Department chair, SVCC)

Instead of viewing students through the lens of academic performance or measurable outcomes, this faculty member expressed her emotional attachment to students as individual learners: "I love my students, and I love teaching them" (Department chair, SVCC).

For those members of the organization who defined students through the use of discursive identities, the definition of success expanded beyond whether or not the student was an institutional asset in the accomplishment of organizational goals. These members recognized that students pursue their own personal goals. In one case, it took a student to impress upon the College President that students' institutional identities, such as aspiring *skilled worker*, are erroneous ascriptions that neglect students' self-perceptions. The President's reflections upon this student reminded him that an institutional identity does not match students' self-understandings:

The Secretary of Education was our commencement speaker three years ago and he looks out at this sea of immigrants after telling them heart-warming stories about Sotomayor and the rest of them and says, "You are the President's vision for the future, the best educated workforce in America. . . . So I'm walking across the thing and I run into this big linebacker guy, I said, "So how was the speech?" He said, "It was alright." I said,

“What do you mean it was alright? That was the Secretary of Education, that’s so cool.” And this guy looks at me, this Iranian, immigrant kid looks at me and says, “Look, I didn’t need heart-warming stories about immigrants, I know about this stuff. And I’ll tell you the truth, I’m not in school to beat the Chinese.” . . . Talk about critical thinking. This is a kid who reads the Sufi poets in original Persian. Whose favorite author is Dostoyevsky, but hasn’t got good grades, is going to take some time to get through the sequence, all the rest of it. So his self-concept is: “I want my life to matter in some kind of way. I want to be important in my family, but also I want my community to be stronger, better, healthier, etc.” (College President, SVCC)

The president’s initial conversation with the student was based upon one assumption about student identity—matching the institution’s goals—but upon relaying the event, the president altered the student’s identity to match the student’s self-concept.

Advantaging Identities: Community College Student as a Distanced Student

The concept of *distance* has salience for the explanation of student identities. Distance refers to more than geographical space; it represents a deviation from the institutional norms and expectations for student identities and abilities that constitute the traditional definition of students at the community college. Rather than fragmentation, *distance* points to the intersectionality between natural, institutional, and discursive identities of community college students. Faculty and administrators articulated two different concepts of distance, which we call *cultural distance* and *socioeconomic distance*. These concepts were intersected by natural identities, such as age and race, and suggest that distance is a fungible concept: One attribute of a student group may have led to distance from the norm, while another attribute may have aligned with the ideal. A student may thus be valued as an ideal student and at the same time devalued by the institution because of his or her deviation from the norm.

Cultural distance refers to the way that a student’s cultural identity differs from that of a quintessential community college student. International and non-native English-speaking students are examples of culturally distanced students in that their language differs from the dominant language spoken in the country of study, which may disadvantage these students at the community college. Administrators and faculty note this disadvantage: “Eighty-percent of the students here speak two languages. They may experience themselves as losers because their primary language is Spanish or Cantonese” (President, SVCC). Institutional members point to the way in which this cultural distance relates to the discursive identity of ESL students. International students’ comprehension of the academic requirements and norms differed from that of the ideal student: “[We] were investigating plagiarism among non-native English speakers because they just copy. . . . They say, ‘Well they can say it a lot better than I can.’ It is a pretty foreign concept” (Administrator, CSCC). International students were labeled as *cheaters* because of the way in which their understandings of academic dishonesty differed from the ideal type.

Yet, cultural distance did not disadvantage international students entirely. For the most part, the institutional identity of international students was more aligned with the ideal student than that of domestic student:

Whereas local students are going home every night, they come to campus for an hour or two and then they leave, go to their part-time job or go hang out with their friends from high school . . . Or they're older and have a job and are living on their own, but they're not spending a lot of time on campus, whereas the international students are immersed in the experience and I think that's got to help them as well. (Business faculty, SVCC)

In this conception, international students met the institutional goal for motivated and prestigious students. Yet, in other conceptions, international students had various attributes contingent upon their country of origin and cultural background. As one Humanities faculty member stated, "The North African students' attitude towards education is much different. They don't value it in the sense into this traditional approach that we take as much as the Vietnamese students were always, you know, such serious students" (Humanities faculty, CSCC). Thus, the identity of international students was multivalent: simultaneously valued and devalued.

Socioeconomic distance, the second type of distance, was characterized by the gap between wealthy and poor populations. This kind of distance was often associated with race and ethnicity of students, and is not consistent with the open-access mission of the community college. That is, the community college has been characterized, traditionally, as a democratizing institution, particularly addressing the socioeconomic needs of disadvantaged populations (Levin, 2014), as a minority-serving institution (Malcom, 2012), and as an institution that enhances equal opportunity for individuals, not groups (Cohen et al., 2013). Yet, at the three colleges in this investigation, administrators aligned the socioeconomic status of students as groups with their racial or natural identities: "Ten-percent of the student body is from [the city], largely middle class, 20% is from the District, probably disproportionate middle class, 50% of the students are from [another city], overwhelmingly low-SES" (President, SVCC). The aggregation of students at community colleges into socioeconomic groups leads to institutional fragmentation of students based on their socioeconomic status. This fragmentation creates distance between students; that distance leads to particular understandings and assumptions about the abilities and capacities of these in comparison with others.

The aggregation of students and groups was intentional, and likely made with social benefits in mind; the articulated goal was to increase student access. Of the various communities that were served by the institution, several were viewed as an underserved population, and thus a target of the college's mission:

The question is can we engage the communities currently marginalized, not just from the school, but from higher ed? So the strategic plan identified by name . . . the Latino, African American, and Filipino communities. It said, "These communities are the communities we're going to go out and recruit." There was a broader net of understanding

both of class and immigration, more broadly. We're looking for new immigrants, people whose families have struggled. (President, SVCC)

Yet, although the impetus for stratifying students based upon race and socioeconomic status had an equalization purpose, the rhetoric and actions separated or distanced the students, in this case native Hawaiian students from all students:

We're going to try to . . . get them [Native Hawaiian students] more financial aid. We're going to try to have more of them enroll. We're going to try to have a higher percentage of them get through the developmental program in a timely manner. (Administrator, PSCC)

Conceptualizing Students: Managerial and Educational Perspectives of Identities

Based on the positionality of the participants within the organization, there were two distinct perspectives of the identity of community college students. Faculty who adopted an educational orientation toward students conveyed the first perspective; administrators and a handful of faculty who adhered to a managerial orientation toward students conveyed the second. In the first, the educational perspective concentrated on the educational needs of students, including individual students and their behaviors, and recognized the effects of the complexity of students' identities. In the second, the managerial perspective focused on organizational productivity (e.g., enrollments and student outcomes) and constructed student identities based upon what Deem and Brehony (2005) describe as new managerialism, with emphasis upon efficiency and quantifiable outcomes, "associated with new kinds of imposed external accountability, including the widespread use of performance indicators and league tables, target-setting, benchmarking and performance management" (p. 220). In short, understandings of organizational life were connected to the interests or roles, or both, of managers.

Faculty focused their definitions of students on the individual academic needs of the students. They noted that students had academic difficulties due to poor preparation: "Sometimes you have to think about communicating differently with students. And some students don't seem as well prepared, but that's probably a common complaint always" (Mathematics faculty, CSCC). The areas of Mathematics and English were of particular concern because of students' performance based upon complex determinants, including students' academic preparation: "The place we can help out the most is English and Math because they're not doing really well in those subjects" (Department chair, PSCC). The educational perspective was constructed by faculty to connect their everyday activities with the needs of each student.

Administrators, taking the managerial perspective, viewed students in large group populations rather than as individuals. For example, one participant stated, "We have developed extremely robust developmental programs in English language and composition in Mathematics. We've developed entirely new pedagogical approaches that attempt to engage students who come in with less than college level

skills” (President, SVCC). Those who took the managerial perspective perceived students as an institutional resource required to ensure the economic survival of the campus. For example, administrators identified international students as a population that had been underutilized: “The campuses are all down in enrollment. . . . They’re looking for extra heads. So this is another winner because now you’re increasing your FTE count as well. . . . You can sell international” (District Chancellor, CSCC). In addition to international students, local communities were viewed as a source of institutional support. The SVCC President asserted that when students from outside the local community came to the college, they not only brought money but they also increased the prestige of the institution: “What we’re bringing is 50% of our students are from [city’s name] and they’re coming into this community. They’re bringing their business; they’re bringing their trade . . . but they’re also bringing their incredible intelligence.” This managerial perspective, then, portrays students as resources.

Although there was divergence between managerial and educational perspectives, there was congruence among faculty on students’ efforts in the face of personal struggles. In contrast to the perception of community college students as indolent (Cohen et al., 2013), faculty at the three institutions acknowledged students’ tenacity and motivation:

We have the perception that a lot of students are working but we don’t necessarily know how many hours they’re putting in. And so once in a while you’ll be talking to an individual student and you’re thinking “Wow.” (Science faculty, PSCC)

The two distinct views of students were largely the result of viewpoint and positionality (e.g., role as administrator, role as faculty). From the educational perspective, the focus was upon student behaviors and individual characteristics, needs, and goals. From the managerial perspective, the focus was upon the organization, with emphasis upon organizational survival and accomplishment.

Conclusion

From the dual perspectives—managerial and educational—there are differing understandings and conceptions of community college students. Organizational members of community colleges are to a considerable extent socialized, pressured, and obligated by their roles to view both their organizations and their students as aligned with goals that are market oriented and assessed by liberal market criteria (Ball, 2012). Those who view the institution as an opportunity structure for justice, for equity in opportunity, and for the development of individual students (Levin, 2014) are predisposed to view students with empathy and to associate themselves with the personal and educational needs of these students. Both perspectives lead to the ascription of multiple student identities. Noticeably absent in the scholarly literature and not considered in policy is the acknowledgment of such a combination of the multiplicity of perspectives on student identity.

While the categories of natural, institutional, and discursive identities were intertwined in the findings of this investigation (Gee, 2000), our separate examination of these identities demonstrated the multifaceted and polymorphic identities of community college students. Furthermore, these complicated identities intertwine into groups or classes. Our omission of affinity identities, connected to a group's behaviors and their distinctive practices, is both a limitation of this investigation and a reminder of the additional complexity of student identities that can be uncovered through further research that addresses students' "allegiance . . . to a set of common endeavors or practices" (p. 105).

Our investigation relied upon faculty and administrators to establish new ways to explain community college students' identities and how those identities may conflict with federal, state, and organizational policies and organizational practices, as well as with scholarly understandings. The investigation demonstrated that community college students are polymorphous: They have identities that are not singular but rather pluralistic and complex. At times, these identities are not aligned with organizational goals.

Contemporary scholarship bestows the identity of *successful* student or *non-traditional* student based on a rigid template related to relatively limited student characteristics, without taking the multiple identities of the whole student into account. Yet, this investigation demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the ways in which multiple identities interact. While scholarship has previously defined community college students through restrictive categories such as non-resident (Cohen et al., 2013), non-traditional (Herideen, 1998; Levin, 2014; Shaw, 1999), or minority (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996), this investigation provides evidence that students' multiple identities are intertwined. We find that at different times or by different people, the same student could be identified as diverse, economically disadvantaged, economically advantaged, geographically isolated, successful, academically deficient, and an ideal student.

Future research can thus rely upon heterogeneous understandings of community college students and not face the limitations of a field that conceptualizes those students in a narrow way. Research that matches organizational initiatives to segments of the student population, for example, adult students or students with disabilities, will have more credibility than research that addresses all students, as if the student body is a monolithic one. Furthermore, policy that assumes a monolithic student body has little likelihood to improve instruction or student learning, such as completion agendas and graduation initiatives (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015), if the assumption is that all or even the overwhelming majority of community college students are on a degree or program completion track, have similar goals, or have equal opportunities (Levin, 2014).

A singular, essentialist, conception of student identity is insufficient to explain the tapestry of classes and behaviors of students at community colleges. Theoretical orientations that take into account heterogeneous and multivariant experiences, characteristics, and understandings of students themselves, such as an intersectional framework, may lead to more robust and, indeed, critical explanations of the complexity of student identity at community colleges, and particularly explain which identities are advantaged or disadvantaged (Collins, 1993; Howard & Renfrow, 2014). For example, Grillo's (1995) theory of intersectionality asserts that the intersection of

different conceptualized classes (e.g., race, gender, and sexual orientation) advantages or disadvantages certain combinations of identities. Following from Grillo, institutional actors' conceptualizations of classes of students, as these relate to the institutional mission of the community college, shape and even create educational environments that are more or less favorable to specific classes of students, similar to how race, gender, and socioeconomic status connect, for example, to violence against poor women of color (Collins, 1993; Crenshaw, 1991). That is, as a consequence of their institutionally conceptualized class, students may be disadvantaged by their intersectional class (Grillo, 1995). The investigation of which identities are advantaged or disadvantaged at community colleges may be critical to maintain the community college's historical access mission in that access includes not only entrance but also treatment of students.

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